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6 Empirically-supported Tips For Forming Positive Habits

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Research indicates it is possible to form new, positive habits, just as it is possible to break negative ones. During the past 10 years, scientists have increased their understanding of why our brain motivates us to habitual behaviors. The term habit refers to a behavior that is done automatically with little thought. A habit can be thought of as being composed of three parts: a cue, a routine and a reward (Durhigg, 2012). Although habits can be automatic and the urge to repeat them strong, bad habits can be broken and new positive habits can be consciously formed.

The following six empirically-grounded tips may increase your chances of successfully breaking bad habits and forming new, positive ones.

LINK THE NEW BEHAVIOR TO A ROUTINE OR ENVIRONMENTAL CUE

Many associate breaking bad habits and forming positive ones only with willpower. Traditionally, most people assume that by forcing themselves to perform a certain behavior enough times they will eventually get used to it and it will become a new habit. More recent research, however, indicates that repetition is only part of the equation when deliberately trying to form new habits (Duhigg, 2012; Lally, 2008).

One technique that does not rely on willpower and demonstrates promise for forming new habits is the habit loop model (Duhigg, 2012). This technique involves prescribing a new routine that is performed at specific times of the day or in response to specific cues. For example, Starbucks Coffee management found that recent high school graduates, because of their age and level of maturity, often performed fine when things were going well, but would inevitably "fall to pieces" when faced with an angry or irritable customer. To counter this tendency, psychologists advised the young employees to deliberately repeat all customer orders, explain that orders had been entered, and politely thank customers. By taking the cue of the customer and immediately prescribing a friendly routine

to counter any negative ways of responding, eventually without even thinking about it, the employees effectively created a new positive habitual behavior that countered tendencies to respond rudely in the face of angry or less friendly customers (Duhigg, 2012).

LINK A DIFFICULT TASK TO A REWARD Human beings respond positively to su

Human beings respond positively to success and this success helps ingrain new behaviors (Paul, 2012). Using the same principals, research indicates that creat-

ing an "if-then" plan can be helpful for deliberately forming new habits (Duhigg, 2012; Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006; Miles & Proctor, 2008). For example, you could tell yourself, "If I do this particularly tough task, then I will reward myself with something that I like."

The idea behind the "if-then" principal is to associate a new behavior, which may feel uncomfortable or hard at first, with something that is positive so that the new behavior is associated with the positive. In using this approach, moreover, your confidence in the new habit increases causing a positive feedback loop that helps ensure the repetition of the new behavior in the future (Duhigg, 2012).

REPEAT NEW BEHAVIORS AND KEEP TRACK OF YOUR PROGRESS

It is generally accepted that if you repeat an action enough times it can become second nature, and in the case of developing a positive habit, that's what is desired (Lally, 2008; Dixon 2008; Neal, 2006). Research in the area of behavior change and habit formation seems to support this assumption, and indicates that will-power is like a muscle that can be built with practice over time (Lally, 2009; Neal, 2006). However, it is often more than just repetition that ensures success.

One technique that appears to be helpful in conjunction with repetition is to log how many times a new behavior is performed and whether it is performed successfully or not (Lally, 2008; Diclemente, Norcross & Prochaska, 2009). In one research study, 96 college students were asked to adopt a new behavior and repeat it daily for 84 days. They also had to link the new behavior to behavior monitoring. Specifically, participants were required to log onto a website each day and report whether they'd performed the behavior and fill out a self-report of how automatic the behavior had become. Of the 82 participants who completed the study, the average time until the behavior became automatic was 66 days. This time frame has become somewhat of a benchmark for habitual behavior formation (Lally, 2008).

Contrary to the popular belief that successful new behaviors must be repeated without missing a day, researchers found that occasionally missing a day didn't seem to affect the final outcome of the habit peaking at 66 days (Lally, 2008). That doesn't mean skipping the habit is helpful, it just means that sometimes things happen and that staying on schedule most of the time (as opposed to *all* of the time) is what builds a new habit.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

A good way to start forming a new habit is to keep it simple. In one study, more complex behaviors were found to take longer to become habits (Lally, 2008). Specifically, the study indicated that participants who'd chosen to instill a new exercise behavior

took about one and a half times shorter for the behavior to reach automaticity compared with participants who adopted the new physical activity behavior along with a new eating or drinking behavior (Lally, 2008).

USE PEERS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Your new habit should begin with an announcement and it is best announced to another person or perhaps many people (Diclemente, Norcross & Prochaska, 2009).

The people you share your experience with can be a source of encouragement and offer motivation, or even a little peer pressure, to practice your new habit (Diclemente, Norcross & Prochaska, 2009). Logging your progress in a journal or finding a visible way to track your improvement also helps to keep you accountable and can be encouraging as you undertake your new habit (Diclemente, Norcross & Prochaska, 2009). There are many ways for you to seek outside motivation, including talking with friends, engaging a partner in your new habit or joining an online group for support.

MAKE A DETAILED PLAN

Most will not argue that forming a plan is always a good first step when taking on a new endeavor. The process of forming positive habits is no exception. With a goal in mind, you'll find that your habit has more direction (Gerson & Woodward, 2013). If

your new habit is learning advanced bike riding, set a goal such as biking a certain amount every week or attending lessons (Neal, 2006). Making a goal-oriented habit will lead to better chances of success rather than a meansoriented one (Gerson & Woodward, 2013). For example, in a weight control study, 104 adults were given a leaflet containing a simple step-by-step plan for instilling new eating and activity behavior routines. Their weight change was compared against a control group at eight and then 32 weeks. The results concluded that having and following the intervention plan significantly increased the odds of new habit-formation and led to significant weight loss compared to the control group (Lally, 2007). The study demonstrates that creating, or being given a plan to follow increases the chance of positive habit formation.

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